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UM LANDS GRANT TO COMMERCIALIZE WATER SENSOR

MISSOULA –

Mike DeGrandpre, a University of Montana chemistry professor and oceanographer, has been awarded a grant to help make a submersible water sensor he developed commercially viable.

The $980,000 grant comes from the National Oceanographic Partnership Program, a collaboration of 15 federal agencies that provides leadership and coordination of national oceanographic research and education initiatives. Grant co-sponsors are the National Science Foundation, NASA and the Office of Naval Research.

The sensor is called a Submersible Autonomous Moored Instrument for pH, or SAMI-pH. The instrument measures the pH of seawater or freshwater. It is an automated analyzer that can be placed on buoys for up to one year. Collected data is logged into an internal memory chip to be downloaded later.

"This grant will facilitate commercialization by providing support for improvements in the mechanical design and software in order to make the instrument more reliable and user-friendly," DeGrandpre said.

He said the sensors are of great interest because of increasing concerns regarding ocean acidification, in which absorption of carbon dioxide released by fossil fuel consumption is

decreasing the ocean pH. This is predicted to negatively impact many plant and animal species. Coral reefs and shellfish, for example, may start to dissolve, disrupting ocean food chains and impacting economies that depend on these marine species.

DeGrandpre first began working on sensor technology for marine research from 1990 to 1993 during his postdoctoral work at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute in Cape Cod, Mass. Since joining UM in 1996, he has commercialized a CO_2 sensor (SAMI-CO_2) which is in use by researchers around the globe. The SAMI-pH is a more recent invention that also is likely to have a significant international market.

In 1999, he founded UM spin-off company Sunburst Sensors, now co-owned with mechanical engineer Jim Beck, to manufacture and market the SAMI-CO_2. Through December 2007, the company had generated $1.2 million in sales and service. Sunburst Sensors is located across the Clark Fork River from campus in the Montana Technology Enterprise Center, Missoula's business incubator.

DeGrandpre said NOPP grants require at least three partners from government, industry or academia. For this grant UM is the lead institution, and Sunburst Sensors and the Scripps Institution of Oceanography are collaborators.

"This is an exciting opportunity to commercialize a sensor while also providing a technology that can help researchers understand how CO_2 is impacting the environment," DeGrandpre said.

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